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ABSTRACT

Factors involved in conducting an effective search for a college or university president are analyzed. Emphasized are issues to be resolved with respect to defining the role of the board of trustees, outgoing president, consultant, and search committee. A series of recommendations are set forth that cover the entire search process beginning with the formation of a search committee and concluding with the final report to the board. These recommendations are considerable and are applicable to all institutions of higher education. (Author/LBH)

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FINDING A COLLEGE PRESIDENT

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Initiating the search

The most important duty of any board of trustees is to select a new college or university president. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to trace the search process from start to finish. The intent of the authors is to further discuss each phase of the process in some depth and, finally, to set forth a series of recommendations which are designed to facilitate the search.

Collectively, articles on the search for college or university presidents present a composite picture of the process involved. They also pinpoint issues, while extending words of caution in the form of specific pitfalls to be avoided. Nonetheless, many search committees are either unfamiliar with these publications or choose to review and then ignore them in favor of foundering under their own conditions of experimentation.

For those who have been involved in the search process, there is likely to be an expression of relief when the final decision is announced. This, however, may be followed by yet another feeling that somehow the results of weeks and months of searching, reviewing, debating, arguing and voting should not be altogether lost to others who are yet to become involved in this process.

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It is widely recognized that the college scene has changed dramatically in recent years as a result of many factors, including the activism of the 1960's, collective bargaining, widespread involvement of major constituencies in governance, the diffusion of decision-making authority, and affirmative action programs. It is not surprising, therefore, that these changes have brought about a significant difference in the way in which colleges and universities approach the entire search process at the presidential level.

Father Reinert, in detailing the problems of search committees, points out that no longer is the perspective candidate likely to be approached without prior notice, the way in which Douglas McGregor was spirited away from Massachusetts Institute of Technology to become Antioch's president in 1948.[1] It is also unlikely that the candidate will be assessed at an informal gathering and offered a presidency on the spot. Instead, search procedures have evolved into a highly complex, structured and costly process. Although few institutions will approach expenditures amounting to the estimated $500,000. it cost Harvard to find a successor for Nathan M. Pusey[2] they must still be prepared to loosen their purse strings or find that their recruiting and search procedures are not yielding anticipated results.

As with any task, the more complex the variables, the more difficult it is to know where to begin. The question of how to launch the search process is likely to be the first one confronting the board, and, since most boards lack experience in conducting an effective search, they are considerably ahead of the game if they recognize their need for help. Furthermore, if they have the patience to think through the major issues

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[1]Paul C. Reinert, S.J. "The Problem with Search Committees," College Management, February, 1974, p. 10.

[2]Ibid.

with which they must come to grips before anything of significance can happen, they are really "off and running."

The most basic issue has to do with the composition and selection of the search committee. Out of an interest in having the "broadest base," and "widespread representation" from within the academic institution and community it serves, boards may by-pass the most significant consideration of all: a determination of the nature of the expertise which it is vital for members to bring to such a committee. A high level of expertise is essential if, for example, they are to pursue an astute line of questioning and probe any superficial response in order to promote a meaningful exchange of ideas.

Importance of consultant

Before selecting a search committee, the board should find a consultant. The importance of retaining the services of a consultant cannot be overemphasized, particularly since most boards are in need of guidance from the start for organizing and implementing the search process. The individual selected as a consultant should be widely recognized on the basis of his/her knowledge, experience and effectiveness with college and university management, as well as scholarly contributions to higher education, other academic disciplines or research. The consultant should have a key role during each phase of the search, so that he/she works with the board during the planning stage, and throughout the pre-screening, screening, interview and final evaulation phases. In addition, the consultant's role should include the coordination of the overall search endeavor, presiding over the presidential search office with its executive secretariat, while functioning as surrogate board with respect to certain

levels of decision-making authority. On the basis of the presumed competency and objectivity which the consultant brings to the college or university, it is also desirable to have him/her chair the search committee, thereby removing from the search process many biases, hidden agendas and subtle pressures which otherwise are heightened when individuals from within the campus and with vested interests are placed in this important advisory position.

The consultant can readily determine whether committee members should vote by secret ballot or hand count. It is important that members not feel in any way intimidated in casting their votes, or feel threatened that the views expressed at committee meetings will flow over to negatively affect their working relationship with colleagues or the new president after he/she is selected. The consultant can also look for signs of abuse of power, so that such efforts can be diluted within the group and not have an adverse impact on the search process.

Along similar lines, it is important that the consultant be chosen independently of the outgoing president and preferably that they not have a record of close personal ties. Conditions that enhance the consultant's objectivity should be preserved from the very beginning of the search process. Toward this end, the board may be well advised to hire a consultant from outside the state.

Role of the outgoing president

Although the board may be tempted to involve the outoing president in the search process, either as a full voting participant or as a resource person, the disadvantages of doing this outweigh any nominal gains to be realized. In the first instance, the president is too close to the problem

to be able to provide an objective point of view, particularly if before the search gets underway, the president favors either an in-house applicant or one from outside the institution.

Another drawback to involving the outgoing president is related to his level of influence among members of the search committee, which might spring from close personal or professional association. It is, therefore, important that the board appoint members to the search committee who do not feel directly or subtly pressured to comply with the president's preferences.

Appointing a search committee

The size of the search committee should be determined by how many individuals are needed to bring expertise to the process. Therefore, its size can vary depending upon the number of categories, as well as criteria that have been identified as measuring sticks for assessing candidates' competency. Needless to say, a small committee is best suited to question and interact with a candidate. By contrast, a larger committee is handicapped since each member has less time in which to question and to clarify issues. Under these conditions spontaneity may be lost, and with it the freedom to pursue new lines of questioning when such a course of inquiry would be beneficial to the committee. In addition, the atmosphere is likely to become more formal as the committee increases in size. It also becomes more difficult to control confidentiality, one of the important injunctions to be imposed on a search committee. Finally, as indicated by Williams' study of reactions by chairpersons to the search operation,

committees that average fifteen or more are "too large for effective management."[3]

Whatever search committee size is decided upon, it is vital that at least one board member be involved in order to insure continuity between the deliberations of the committee and the final selection by the board of a new president. It is also important that all committee members enjoy full voting privileges. To do otherwise, is to minimize the potential contributions and impact of any one expert selected for membership on the committee. Moreover, extending the vote to all committee members avoids relegating to some a second class citizenship, particularly since the work of the committee demands equally their time, involvement, expertise and contributions to the search process. If there is any question about a potential committee member being entitled to vote during the search process, it would suggest the person doesn't belong on this top level committee. To carry non-voting members through the search process is wasteful of time and energy.

The motivation underlying a committee member's acceptance of an appointment to the search committee can be complex and may range from a genuine interest in finding the best possible person for the presidency to a more personal need for status and power. If it is the latter valence which primarily motivates the individual member, the consultant (particularly if he or she is knowledgeable about leadership skills and small groups processes) can analyze the direction and degree of influence which each

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[3] Glenn D. Williams, "The Search for an Improbable Paragon (i.e., College President)." Phi Delta Kappan, April, 1976, p. 537.

member exercises, thereby diffusing any attempt to exercise an abuse of power.

Responsibilities of the search committee

The search committee must identify and design appropriate measuring instruments for each phase of screening. If necessary, the services of a resource person can be retained for developing these tools which may encompass (a) a pre-screening rating scale, (b) a rating scale for more refined screening of those candidates who emerged after initial pre-screening, (c) a questionnaire for conducting the interview, and (d) an evaluation form or rating scale for use following each interview for each candidate. Data can then be compiled by the resource person and presented to the search committee for final analysis and discussion before selecting those to be interviewed. If other sectors of the campus are involved in any aspect of the search process, the format for quantifying data and presenting their input can also be developed and recorded by the resource person for consideration by the search committee.

There is little point in establishing absolute numbers to be interviewed. Instead, the numbers identified should be an outgrowth of how many very strong candidates manage to stay at the top after being evaluated at different stages. Thus, only five may be invited for interviews, or ten or more, depending upon the strength of candidates in the initial applicant pool. This, in turn, will depend upon whether the search committee has timed its advertising to fit in with the professional commitments of potential candidates. Another consideration is whether the specifications outlined in the job announcement are sufficiently attractive to interest those with top level qualifications. Search committees should also be aware that

attractive candidates may withdraw for a variety of personal and professional reasons.

Presidential search committees should be sure to allot sufficient time for each interview. In some cases an applicant can quickly demonstrate a lack of fitness for the position. This is not normally the case, however. Instead, it usually takes time and digging to get a "feel" for the candidate. Time is likely to pass quickly, particularly with individuals who enjoy the give and take of a well conducted interview.

It is important to recognize that a really strong applicant is evaluating the committee just as the committee is judging the candidate. The level of sustained interest on the part of a highly qualified applicant for the presidency will be influenced by the way in which the committee conducts itself in the interview. The physical setting of the interview is also important, both in the impression it makes on the applicant and in facilitating a free, open and spontaneous exchange of views. For these reasons, tables and chairs should be placed in such a manner as to put the applicant at ease, rather than to set the stage so that the applicant is placed in the role of supplicant.

While discussions within the committee regarding each individual applicant should be open and candid, voting is probably best done by secret ballot. Some committee members may be reluctant to express their views openly regarding a candidate for fear of reprisal should their vote become known outside the committee. Others may be unduly influenced in this regard by persons on the committee itself and arguments in favor of open voting are not persuasive. Disadvantages of secret ballots are similarly unimpressive. Whatever form is selected, agreement on voting must be reached well in

advance of the screening process. As suggested previously, the consultant's views on methods of voting are likely to prove helpful.

Lines of inquiry by search committee

In evaluating candidates, a search committee is, in fact, making certain predictions concerning applicants. Toward this end, the committee must assess how the candidate will function with respect to fiscal matters, management, and academic leadership, as well as public relations and fund raising.

It is simple for a committee to formulate a routine set of general questions, most of which are guaranteed to elicit a routine set of general responses. However, it requires a level of specialization among the members to interpret the responses and to follow up with a line if inquiry designed to question, clarify, explore, stimulate, provoke and challenge all candidates. Responses, to be meaningful, must have depth and scope, thereby providing the committee with the basis for not only evaluating, but predicting performance, as well.

There are at least four broad areas of concern to the search committee, one of which deals with money. Colleges and universities, both public and private, are big businesses which must be managed by presidents. Candidates must, therefore, demonstrate an understanding of fiscal affairs which goes beyond establishing a budget to actually administering one. If fund raising is an essential part of the president's responsibilities, this must also enter into the assessment process.

Since a second area concerns management, the search committee will want to explore the candidate's philosophy of management. What is his/her definition of "open door," participatory management, and management by objectives? What is his/her concept of responsibility, authority and

accountability? What are the candidate's views regarding training programs for staff, as well as his/her awareness of potential sources for funding such programs? What kind of communication network does the candidate seem to prefer, and why?

Thirdly, the search committee must concern itself with the applicant's potential for academic leadership, both within and without his/her area of expertise. Can the candidate excite and stimulate those within the college or university, as well as the community? How does the candidate perceive the relationship between the institution and community?

A fourth area concerns the proper relationship between the major components of the institution itself: instruction, student personnel services, continuing education, and the business office. How does the candidate see these units functioning in relation to each other?

As previously indicated, a search committee must be structured in such a way as to enable it to evaluate the ability of candidates to be effective in at least these four areas. Thus, the committee will be better equipped to carry out its major responsibility which is to evaluate the fitness of the candidate for the job.

The precise nature of the role of the search committee must also be identified very early in the planning stage, particularly its function with respect to determining (a) presidential search budget, (b) the establishment of a presidential search office, (c) the time frame that is to be operative, (d) scope of advertising, and type of information to be included, i.e., salary range, (e) sources and methods for soliciting names, (f) measuring techniques for pre-screening, screening and interviewing, (g) descriptive materials about the institution to be sent to top candidates, (h) the kind of input,

if any, that will be sought from other groups, individuals and committees at the institution, and (i) method for recommending names to the board.

Role of other groups

If the search committee decides to invite input from other groups on campus and in the community, the parameters within which these groups must work should be established. It is important that there be no misconception about their function and relationship to the search committee, or how, at what stage, and for what purpose their input will be drawn into the deliberations of the search committee. Otherwise, the search committee may find too much of its time and energy being channeled toward placating these groups.

The tendency in the presidential search process is to proliferate committees for the sake of satisfying constituencies or vested interest groups inside and outside the institution. Instead, attention should be directed toward limiting the number of evaluators to those best qualified to assess candidates on the basis of their specialized knowledge regarding areas of presidential responsibility. This is not to argue against other committees representing various sectors of the institution, but rather to make a case for identifying the purposes being served and the rationale underlying the inclusion of input from other groups, as well as the basis and method for identifying their membership.

In the event that other committees, representing such components of the college or university as faculty, administration and students, are also involved in the search process, opportunities for misunderstanding and confusion are legend. These problems can be minimized if the roles of such committees, as already suggested, are clearly spelled out in advance

of the process. For example, a decision may be reached to have chairpersons of these committees participate in the process of pre-screening on the grounds that their perspective will be broadened, thereby increasing their effectiveness. In this event, it should be understood that the selection of candidates for interviews is the sole responsibility of the search committee. This task is difficult enough without inviting additional problems.

The benefits to be gained from the involvement of other committees or groups can only be determined from an analysis of a particular institution. If it facilitates the search process and helps to refine impressions of leading candidates, it may work well. On the other hand, if committees are multiplied for purposes peripheral to the selection process (i.e., morale, feelings of status), it may be well to avoid going through the time consuming motions of inviting widespread involvement.

Making recommendations to the board

The framework within which candidates are recommended to the board for consideration is a function of two factors: (a) whether or not the board requested the names be submitted unranked or in rank order, and (b) whether or not the board has taken into consideration the relative position of each candidate with respect to each other, since there may be a considerable spread in rating points between the first and second candidate, suggesting that the first candidate is so far ahead of the others that the list of names may actually constitute only one strong recommendation. Under these conditions, if the leading candidate withdraws or refuses the salary offer, the board must decide whether to consider others on the list or reopen the search. A review of job notices in major publications for the position of president

illustrates the fact that boards sometimes find it necessary to extend or reopen the search for a president.

A final report, prepared by the consultant, should accompany the names submitted to all board members, so that they are fully cognizant of the wide range of factors that entered into the entire search process, while also giving something of the "flavor" of interviews and discussions. This should include a description of recruiting procedures, a summary of the background of all applicants, including ethnic groups represented, distribution of men and women, and current position held. The report should also include a description of those invited for interviews, the methods utilized for evaluation, as well as the way in which input from other subcommittees or sectors was invited, received and utilized in the deliberations of the search committee. A commentary about each candidate being recommended to the board should accompany the report. If the board prefers not to have final candidates ranked, this summary about each candidate will at least provide a clearer understanding of the various factors which prompted the search committee to arrive at its recommendations. Committing their reasons to paper may also encourage search committees to do a thorough job throughout the process and help them to focus on significant qualifications, rather than get bogged down in lesser characteristics.

To those who may question or challenge the appropriateness of instituting such a time consuming process into higher education, it should be recognized that colleges and universities have just started to approach the methodical way in which business and industry have gone about evaluating candidates for top level executive positions.

Recommendations

From the foregoing analysis of the presidential search process certain specific recommendations emerge:

1. The services of a consultant of national repute should be retained by the board.
2. The consultant should be involved in every step of the search process.
3. The consultant should chair the presidential search committee.
4. A presidential search office should be established.
5. The consultant should also serve as executive director of the presidential search office.
6. Members of the presidential search committee should be selected on the basis of their expertise in areas of importance to the job of president.
7. At least one board member should serve on the search committee.
8. The outgoing president of the institution should not be involved in nominating or selecting the consultant or members of the search committee.
9. The outgoing president should not be involved in the deliberations of the search committee.
10. The number of members appointed to the search committee should not exceed eight.
11. All members of the search committee should have voting privileges.
12. Voting should take place by secret ballot.
13. The academic calendar should be considered in the timing of the position announcement, as well as the target date for filling the vacancy.

14. Four or more months should be provided for the presidential search.
15. The position announcement must be specific and include salary range.
16. Measuring instruments for evaluating candidates should be designed early in the search.
17. Injunctions for the search committee should be established at the beginning of the search.
18. All committee members must be required to review the files for all applicants. This should be one of the conditions for membership on the search committee.
19. All committee members must agree to attend all meetings and interviews before being appointed to the search committee.
20. Sufficient time should be provided for each interview with flexibility for expanding the time frame whenever necessary.
21. Confidentiality in all matters pertaining to the search must be honored.
22. Involvement of other committees representing specific components of the institution should be encouraged only if it can be demonstrated that these committees have something to contribute of a specific nature, and that they accept the condition that they have a limited scope of authority.
23. The consultant should be expected to prepare a final written report to the board outlining the procedures used by the search committee, as well as the basis for recommending finalists to the board.

Conclusions

The recommendations set forth are intended to make an important and complicated task more organized and manageable. By highlighting issues and establishing a chronology of steps for dealing with these, it is anticipated that the initial planning by any board will be greatly facilitated. It is implicit from the discussion that any attempt to save time, money and effort must be balanced against the risks imposed by such short cuts. Luck may come to the rescue of the board, but the stakes are too high to place reliance on chance. The presidential search is indeed the most important challenge facing the board and must be treated as such.